

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 16: 1 Samuel 13-15

by Virgil Thompson

The Story of Saul, King of Israel

Samuel sought to warn the people of Israel that kings were not all they were cracked up to be. The next part of the Bible story proves that truer words than Samuel's words were never spoken. In the next three issues we take up the story of the foils, frolics, and foibles of these three kings—Saul, David, Solomon. Our story begins with the first of the three kings, Saul.

Saul Was . . . Years Old

Contemporary readers of the Bible can know neither how old Saul was when he began to rule over Israel nor how long his reign lasted. There is, literally, a hole in the Holy Bible's story of Saul. Somewhere along the way of the story's transmission down to us that piece of the story was lost.

For some readers of the Bible that might raise worrisome questions about the reliability of the Bible. Can you trust the Bible to deliver the word of the Lord if parts have gone missing? Such worrisome questions have spawned all sorts of theories designed to prop up the reliability of the Bible. But as one of our finest teachers in the Lutheran tradition, Steven Paulson, has pointed out, Luther didn't put much stock in such theories about the origin, dissemination, miraculous preservation or holiness of the Bible's delivery system. One simple fact explains Luther's lack of interest in such theories: the church does not give life to the Bible as the Word of God. It works the other way around. The Bible as the living Word of God gives life to the church, the community of believers. Isn't it exactly true? Could any of us deny that in hearing the Bible's story, holes and all, we have heard the living Word of God by which we have been named and numbered among the people of faith?

Believers are not born into and sustained in the life of faith by the church spinning its wheels with theories about the Bible. The proof of the Bible's pudding is in the tasting. So, with Luther, we jump right into the story, questioning and

being questioned, trusting the promise that in the course of the story proclaimed we encounter the living Word of the Lord to make and keep us believers!

Saul Reigned . . . Years Over Israel

It doesn't really matter that the Bible has a hole in the place that tells exactly how many years Saul reigned over Israel. However many years it was, what is clear is that Saul's reign as king was ended practically before it began. As the storyteller laments at the end of the story, "*The Lord was sorry that he had ever made Saul king over Israel*" (1 Samuel 15:35). But perhaps we should begin at the beginning before we too quickly come to the end.

The Royal Battles of King Saul

From the outset of his reign Saul waged battle against the enemies of Israel. In that battle he was always outflanked and outgunned. Israel's odds against the Philistines were typical. Against Saul's army of 3,000 soldiers, the Philistines mustered a fighting force of 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and "*boots on the ground*" as many as the grains of sand on the seashore (1 Samuel 13:5). The odds against them were not lost on Saul's troops. They had begun to desert in ever growing numbers. In panic they fled into caves and fox holes, wherever they could find cover. They hid under rocks, in tombs and cisterns (1 Samuel 13:6).

To be fair, we'd have to acknowledge that Saul's troops were neither the first nor the last believers to shrink away from the conflict between faith and unbelief. We ourselves know firsthand the fear of not being able to stand against the forces of sin, death and the power of the devil.

A Prayer for Your Kingdom

Counting the Philistine odds against them on the one hand, and his dwindling troops on the other hand, Saul himself had grown anxious and doubtful about survival, let alone success on the battlefield. Samuel had sought to assure Saul that God would never abandon him. But in the midst of the mounting

crisis posed by the far-superior military of the Philistines, Samuel was nowhere to be seen or heard. The preacher's promise paled in the fierce face of everything to the contrary, so Saul took matters into his own hands. In the absence of Samuel, Saul offered a prayer for the wellbeing of his troops and his subjects. But for some reason—which I must admit I do not understand—Saul's prayer did not go over so well with the Lord God. It is very disturbing to me, that someone could get into trouble with God for praying. But Samuel, speaking for God, took Saul's prayer as a foolish act of disobedience that would cost Saul his kingdom (1 Samuel 13:13).

You might speculate that Saul's prayer was one of those fox-hole prayers to which our fears sometimes drive us. But according to the story, Saul's prayer is not condemned for that reason. No reason is given to explain exactly why God rejected Saul and his prayer. Granted, it is clear from the story that Saul was guilty of failing to obey the command of the Lord. But it does not say exactly where, when, and how Saul went awry of God's Commandments. Is it simply that Saul was not authorized to pray to God about the cares and affairs of his life?

Prayer, Not an Entitlement of the U.S. Constitution?

I would wager that most people today assume that the right to pray or not pray as they see fit is unquestioned, taken for granted. In the United States we might debate when and where people can exercise their right to pray or not pray as they see fit, but what if the automatic presumption of the right to pray is simply a false presumption? What if it should turn out, as it seems in Saul's story, that permission to bring the affairs and cares of the heart to God in prayer must be granted by God? I think most people, if not every last one of us, would find it disturbing to learn that permission to pray is by God's explicit invitation only.

Luther had a piece of advice for Bible readers who find what they read to be perplexing or disturbing. The thing to do, he said, is to run as fast as your legs will carry you to the Lord Jesus and take refuge in him. Jesus Christ is the very breath of life to faith. He, alone, is our sanctuary and confidence. Faith lives solely out of the promise of God in Christ to be for us and not against us. As Luther used to say, *"to flee from and find refuge in God against God; such is the impossibility that makes theology possible."* That's what the first disciples did, and that is what we too have permission to do. When they were worried about the right way to pray, the disciples ran directly to Jesus: *"Lord, teach us to pray."* And He did not disappoint or forsake them.

When you pray, say, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive our sins that we may forgive others their sins against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial. — Matthew 6:9-13

You can't go wrong with that prayer, Jesus assures those who belong to Him. And by virtue of His baptismal claim upon us—*"You are mine!"*—we may be confident that we do belong to Him. Jesus is our God-given permission to take all the cares and affairs of our lives to God in prayer. That's the reason we Christians pray in the name of Christ and in no other name. As Luther explains in the Small Catechism:

Here, in the promise of Christ, God encourages us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer even as beloved children approach their dear father.

By the promise of God in Christ we may, in completely unguarded fashion, let out to God in prayer all the cares and affairs of our lives, all the mixed-up uncertainties, all the fears and foibles of our lives. And even if we find ourselves shaking in our boots under cover in the foxhole—especially then—we may boldly and confidently pray to God for help and protection.

The Beginning of the End for Saul

For the rest of his life, Saul battled on against the enemies of God's people. He chalked up victory after victory, but it was a losing battle for Saul. The rest of the story is filled with regret and remorse. God regrets ever having elected Saul King of Israel (1 Samuel 15:11). Samuel grieves the whole sad affair. Samuel especially grieves Saul's self-deception and presumptuousness (1 Samuel 15:35). To the bitter end Saul fails to see his sin for what it is. Even when he is driven to confess his sin (1 Samuel 15:30), he prattles on about saving face in public. *"I have sinned,"* he confesses, *"yet honor me,"* he begs Samuel, *"honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God"* (1 Samuel 15:30-31).

... continued on next page

Virgil Thompson

teaches New Testament at Gonzaga University. A prolific author and former pastor, he currently serves as managing editor of The Lutheran Quarterly.



The rest of Saul's story gets entangled with the story of David, which we take up next time. For now we must be content to make a long story short. The short of it is that eventually Saul's self-deception and inability to come clean with his sin drove him utterly mad. He was unable to distinguish friend from foe and ended up treating everybody as an enemy. He lived in constant fear, terrified of people and circumstances that posed no threat to him. Eventually, Saul's guilt and fear became too much and he took his own life.

A Beginning in the End for Us

What became of Saul beyond the Biblical story is impossible to say. I am not God, and neither are you. The final judgment on a person's life does not belong to us—it belongs to God alone. But perhaps just there is the saving Good News the Bible and church have to proclaim. It would be a mistake to presume on God's judgment, of course, as the Bible story makes quite clear. But this much may be said with confidence: if the final judgment were left to us, on the basis of our works, no one would be saved. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the

Romans and to us (Romans 3:9-19). But as it is, left to God, perhaps some will be saved, indeed many, if not all, Luther more than once observed. When I think of Saul's story, how he came to the end of the road, having lost everything—his kingdom, his pride, his sanity—I think, perhaps that's just where we begin to have ears to hear the promise of Christ for us and not against us. *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, I have come to call not the righteous but sinners”* (Mark 2:17).

Looking Ahead: We Three Kings – David's Story (1 Samuel – 1 Kings)

As we have already anticipated, the end of Saul's story becomes entangled with David's story. In the next episode of Reading the Bible with Luther we take up the story of King David. The subtitle of the story might well be “You are the Man.” But if so, it wouldn't necessarily be spoken as a compliment. Still, in those words lies the promise of new beginning in the life of faith.

reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



Session 16: 1 Samuel 13-15

by Virgil Thompson

Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. One of the central themes of Saul's story as we have been telling it here has to do with prayer. How does the story, particularly in our telling of it, shape Christian understanding of the right way to pray?.
2. While, admittedly, we cannot say what became of Saul beyond the biblical telling of his story, we may hear in the story the promise that it is in losing our “earthly kingdoms” that we qualify to hear the saving word of Jesus, which ushers us into the kingdom of God. This word is witnessed differently among the biblical writers. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus declares, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Paul declares, “...for we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28)! How does,

or should, this gospel truth shape the witness and mission of the church? If you were Saul's pastor what would your sermon to him sound like?

3. As you think about this portion of the story, consider the questions below:
 - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the story? Why?*
 - b. *What background knowledge would help me understand the story more clearly? How does my experience help to understand the story?*
 - c. *What does this story promise to faith? What does this book demand of faith?*

Download a free copy of this article and Bible study:
<http://www.solapublishing.org/pages/Adult-Education.html>

Select: **Reading the Bible with Luther - Session 16**